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ABSTRACT

A developmental dialectical approach to understanding and working with lower and middle class damaged parents--those identified as abusive and neglectful--has specific features and implications. The approach suggests that (1) the personality characteristics and interpersonal relations of parents are inseparable from their social conditions; (2) characteristics of adequate and damaged parents of lower and middle classes are both product and contributor to the social and material conditions of their classes; (3) poor parents' powerlessness and external locus of control reflects contradictions resulting from the interpenetration of social and psychological structures; and (4) the middle class's internal locus of control is as far from (or as close to) reality as the poor's external locus of control. Dialectics' affirmation of the integrity of levels of systems suggests that all generalizations about social status cannot substitute for knowing the individual and that development and change ensue from contradictions inherent within and between systems. Intervention with low-power-position damaged parents involves clarifying their personal and social victimization. For middle class parents, too, intervention involves clarification of personal victimization and social pressures involved in maintaining social status. Team work, group therapy, and parent support groups should be the contexts of work with damaged parents; therapists should be supportive and affirmative. While healing might be slow and incremental, enough quantitative change will result in a qualitative difference in the parent. (RH)

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL DIALECTICAL APPROACH TO CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL DIALECTICAL APPROACH TO CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

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Although other views have been developed (Wiehe, 1985), the predominant view in the understanding and especially the treatment of abusive and neglectful parents still stems from a psychoanalytic perspective. This view stresses the parent's past poor childhood experiences, the "intergenerational cycle" of the problem and the deformed character structure of the parent that mediates between the past and the present. The problem is seen as classless, and the treatment plan considered best, often involves individual therapy which focuses on personality defects and their relation to the parents' past upbringing. (Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenweiser & Williams, 1981; Steele, 1980).

I'd like to introduce here a hypothetical composite sketch of a damaged parent child relationship, and a possible traditional approach and case history. Claudia, the mother, would first go to a pediatrician because of her concern for her toddler's lack of physical development. When multiple hospital tests reveal no clear physical problems, the pediatrician would refer Claudia and her son, Nat, to a psychologist. Within the course of a few sessions, it might become clear that Claudia vacillates between overcontrolling Nat's activities and neglecting him. Nat's unmet needs and his need to develop autonomy might take the form of his refusal to eat and therefore his failure to thrive.

During therapy, Claudia's present and past interpersonal relationships would be explored. For example, an early emotional deprivation might become clear. Having lost her mother when she was young, she was passed around till she settled in her maternal aunt's home. Here, she became responsible for raising her cousins, as a way of paying her way. She married young to an older man, to get out of her aunt's house. Her husband was a successful small businessman who provided well for her and the family. He did not have time for the family, but she did not expect that from him. While all went well on the surface with a first child, Nat, who was not planned, became a "problem" child. Over time, the therapist would help Claudia realize her identification with the "unwanted" child and the neglectful caregivers of her past. Consciousness and release of feelings associated with her own feelings of neglect is considered important in her healing.

What does research indicate about the above analysis and treatment of damaged parents? Available, often retrospective studies and case histories of these parents on the whole support their maltreatment by their parents when they were young (Kotelchuck, 1982; Oliver, 1978). Thus, to the best of our knowledge, these parents do seem to have had poor upbringings. However, studies report that the majority of damaged parents lack serious personality disorders and there is little agreement in the literature on their psychological traits (Gelles, 1982; Parke & Collmer, 1975). While the stage of the science of personality and its assessment probably contribute to the lack of clarity in

these findings, it is also possible that the differing results reflect some confounding variables such as class, race, and sex.

Evidence on the classlessness of the problem is not strong either (Pakizegi, 1985). Most low income minority mothers do not maltreat their children, and there is also evidence of poor parenting among the rich (Crawford, 1978; Stone, 1979). However, even considering the overreporting explanation, it seems that mothers (Brandon, 1976; Pelton, 1981), the poor (Gil, 1970; Kotelchuck, 1982) and ethnic minorities (Gil, 1970; Child Abuse & Neglect Programs, 1977) are overrepresented in maltreating families. Thus, issues of class, race and sex do seem to have some bearing in damaged parenting.

While there is little systematic evaluation of individual therapy for damaged parents, data from the general field of therapeutic treatment again suggests that the issues of class, race and sex have to be considered in its evaluation and prescription for damaged parents. For example, not only do clinics offer more long term insight therapy to the higher classes, and more short term, supportive or drug therapy to low income people, but the latter also keep fewer of their appointments and stop therapy sooner than the former group (Brill & Storrow, 1964). A similar finding holds for the races, with whites being treated like those of higher incomes and blacks being treated like those of lower incomes (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982). Also, individual therapy is more effective with more intellectual people with verbal facility, where there is a common base of assumptions and experiences between therapist and

client (Brill et al., 1964; Grunebaum, Weiss, Cohler, Hartman & Gallant, 1982). Since most therapists are from middle to upper income backgrounds,they are potentially more helpful to damaged parents from similar backgrounds. The burnout common among professionals working with low income damaged parents (D'Agostino, 1979) might be partly a reflection of their feelings of inefficacy with this group.

The above data suggests that issues of class, race and sex are highly involved in damaged parents' lives. This does not mean that it is impossible for therapists to be effective with parents of different classes, races and sexes. But it does mean that understanding how these issues operate becomes necessary for effective treatment. An analysis and treatment plan based solely on the parent's past poor familial experiences is inadequate . A new formulation that incorporates the strengths of the prevailing psychoanalytic perspective with data about the social dimensions of these parents' lives promises to be more productive.

A developmental dialectical approach addresses many of the issues raised above. Basically this model examines maltreating parents' present stage needs and characteristics in the context of their developmental history and in the context of the social systems that they have been and are a member of.

Greenspan's developmental structuralist model (1981) suggests that the timing and nature of parenting problems reflects the stage and need which was frustrated in the parent as a child. For example, if the parent has problems with her child's attempts at individuation , it is likely that her own attempts at

separation were threatening to her parent when she was growing up. A developmental approach further implies that the totality of the person has to be considered as s/he develops. Present stage needs and characteristics have to be addressed as well as past events in one's life. An adolescent mother has different needs and capabilities than an older mother. Cognitive capabilities and needs have to be addressed as well as emotional ones. Strengths have to recognized as well as deficiencies,and the conscious has to be addressed as well as the unconscious. All of these are in a process of development over time in the parent as well as in the child.

This developmental approach can be incorporated into and further expanded by the dialectical approach. The dialectical approach is one with a longstanding philosophical background, (Hegel, 1975). However, despite the works of people such as Reich and Marcuse, its application to mainstream psychology, and developmental psychology , in particular, is more recent (Buss, 1979; Riegel, 1975 & 1976). This approach stresses the integration and interpenetration of the various parts of a whole. Thus, behavior (in this case, maltreating behavior), is understood not only intrapersonally and interpersonally, and not only as a product of social, political and economic systems, but as impacting on them as well. Thus, the activity and agency aspect of people is emphasized as well as their being products of environmental influences.

While the integrity of each level of organization (e.g. individual, society) is recognized, these levels are seen as

interpenetrating and transforming of one another. Although some things change slowly, activity, change and development are seen as the essence of people and social systems and a product of the contradictions and asynchrony inherent within and between them. Contradictions involve the unity of opposites in and across organisms and systems. For example, in Piaget's theory, the contradiction between the child's mental structures and those of external reality, creates a disequilibrium, that with further activity, leads to a new level of development. While change occurs sometimes quantitatively, enough quantitative change involves a qualitative difference. For example, the speedup of the pace of life due to the use of machinery, has led to a qualitatively different type of life than that described simply by a quantitative description in the increase of speed of doing things.

What does this model imply for understanding maltreating parents? It suggests that the personality characteristics and interpersonal relations of these parents are inseparable from their social conditions. As a first step in exploring the implications of the developmental dialectical approach for understanding and working with damaged parents, it is important therefore to provide a descriptive analysis of their social structure and how it might be involved in their poor parenting.

The overall value framework of independence and individualism in American society is closely related to its free enterprise economic structure. One consequence of this type of economic system is a hierarchical class structure in the society.

A person's social class is one of the most pervasive aspects of his/her social condition. In fact, some claim that other social categories, such as race and gender, derive their significance from class issues (Dixon,1978). What is clear, from empirical findings, is that there is a high correlation between the characteristics of groups in high power positions in the society (i.e. the materially comfortable, whites and men), and between that of those in low power positions in the society (i.e. the poor, ethnic minorities and women) (Veroff, Douvan, &Kulka, 1981).

While the U.S. society consists of several social classes (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958), for purposes of this paper, I will deal with two segments of the society , the middle class and the poor. By the middle class is meant families involved in white collar professions, who are usually salaried and have at least a high school education (e.g. teachers, postal workers). By the poor is meant unskilled laborers or those who are on welfare, with at most a high school education, and more often, high school dropouts. Data clearly suggests that people in the society have a class consciousness and categorize themselves accordingly (Lundberg,1974).

What the society values as ideal and good often reflects the values of the dominant class. Thus the characteristics given for a healthy personality are the same as those reported for the middle class (Lundberg, 1974; Werner, 1957). The middle class is reported to be characterized by a future orientation in their activities. This encourages planning, deferred gratification and

goal orientation. This class emphasizes rationality ,activity and the individual's efforts in attaining goals (an internal locus of control). While they are involved with relatives, they have more relationships with friends. Their relationships are less sex-typed than the poor's. They also become involved with secondary groups and participate more in political life (Gonzalez & Zimbardo, 1985;Lundberg, 1974; Spiegel, 1982). People of higher income and education feel better about their lives, feel more in control, less demoralized and have higher aspirations in life than those in lower positions (Veroff, et al., 1981).

The poor are reported to be present oriented, going for instant gratification. They are more passive vis-a-vis life's problems, tend to have more of an external locus of control and stress tradition and the primary group. They do not join secondary groups often and/or are not active in them. They often do not participate in the political system. (Lundberg, 1974; Spiegel, 1982).

In childrearing , those in high power positions in the society are reported to be more lenient, democratic and less disciplinary than those in the low power positions. Discipline among the middle class is reported to be more oriented to internal motivations, while for the poor it focuses on the immediate concrete results of action. The former also has higher aspirations for the child, and expects the child to act independently sooner than the latter group. (Davis & Havighurst, 1969; Lambert, Hamers & Frasure-Smith, 1979; Lundberg, 1974).

Few studies differentiate between the maltreating behavior

of the classes. The samples studies most are the poor, and the characteristics often reported, seem indistinguishable from those of the poor in general. Damaged parenting is reported to be characterized by harsh and inconsistent discipline and/or undercontrol, inaccurate reading of or nonresponsivity to the child's psychological needs, rejection, and age inappropriate expectations. Damaged mothers are characterized as as exhibiting low self esteem, being impulsive, feeling powerless (external locus of control) and being socially isolated (Elmer, 1977, Garbarino & Gilliam, 1980; Polansky et al., 1981; Steele, 1980). The few class related findings are general in nature. For example, neglect seems to predominate in low income families (Polansky et al., 1981).

Developmental dialectics suggests that the characteristics of adequate and damaged parents' of both classes are both a product of and contribute to the social and material conditions of their classes. They are a product in that they reflect the internalization of external conditions of their lives. For example, among adequate parents, the greater mobility, the larger number of experiences and the greater relative stability of life conditions available to the middle class, and the reality of more death, illness and disruptions in jobs and education for the poor (Veroff et al., 1981) reflect themselves in differences in characteristics and in parenting. Stability of conditions allows for rational planning and for the perception of oneself as in control. Having the welfare office in charge of your life

however, and having the minimum of your biological and psychological needs met, promotes an external locus of control and an emphasis on immediate gratification when the chance is there. Having basic material needs met allows middle class people to become attentive to internal motives and needs. Struggling for the physical minimums in life, leaves little room for attention to much else. The higher mobility of middle class people, due to their jobs is probably related to their having less family close by and therefore their greater involvement with friends . In addition, homeowners are more likely to become involved with neighbors than those living in apartments (Bronfenbrenner ,Moen, & Garbarino, 1984).

These internalized traits, in turn, contribute to the maintenance of the class system in their own lives and in the society. By acting in certain ways each class increases the likelihood of remaining in that class. For example, a stress on the present will mean diminishing the significance of education and deferred gratification, skills necessary if the poor is to rise to the middle class.

For damaged low income parents, developmental dialectics suggests that their powerlessness and external locus of control reflects contradictions resulting from the interpenetration of social and psychological structures. On the one hand powerlessness reflects a paralyzing guilt due to the internalization of external blame and responsibility. On the other hand, it is partly a correct reflection of their reality. While they have been victimized both by their families and the

society, these institutions have given them the society's individualistic message that they alone are responsible for that position and brought it upon themselves by being "bad" (short of parental expectations and lacking social skills such as delayed gratification). While they feel guilt and shame for their position, they simultaneously feel the injustice of their position, and defensively totally blame external conditions.

Given the above, one could argue that the psychoanalytic explanation for poor parenting is therefore applicable for the materially comfortable, but not for the poor; i.e. if there are few external pressures on high power position people to lead to poor parenting, then their poor parenting must come mainly from a familial past. However, such a conclusion is neither warranted nor scientifically efficient.

In a materially comfortable life situation, it is easy to take for granted, the role of the other systems in one's life. All appearances (and social messages) suggest to middle class families that it is their hard work alone that has resulted in where they are in life. Witness the rise of organizations such as EST, which emphasize that the individual alone is responsible for what happens to him. These organizations cater mainly to the socially successful (Nahem, 1981). There is little analysis of all that is taken for granted before the individual's actions are effective.

With a training in internal locus of control, a social status that supports that, and educational and other opportunities that are available to the middle class, it is not

surprising that parents from this class are more concerned about the adequacy of their parenting than the poor (Veroff et al., 1981). Add these to a personal past of rejection and it is likely that middle class damaged parents take personal credit for their social status as well as for their personal and parenting problems.It is likely that contrary to the perceived powerlessness of low income damaged parents, middle income damaged parents might feel unrealistically omnipotent and feel a need to control all situations with their children, and to blame themselves for all that goes wrong.

Developmental dialectics suggests that in a hierarchical situation, the different social positions of each class has led to an incomplete emphasis on only one aspect of the situation in the understanding of their lives. While there are the personal, interpersonal , social, political and economic systems operating on who we are and how we parent, who we are and how we parent also influence the larger systems. Thus, the middle class's internal locus of control, for example, is as far from (or as close to) reality as the poor's external locus of control.

Furthermore, available analyses of social conditions suggests that all is not easy for those in high power positions in the society and that there are stresses associated with middle class life. Two surveys of national samples done in 1957 and 1976 revealed that job satisfaction has gone down in this generation (Veroff, et al., 1981). The increasing bureaucratization, mechanisation, deskilling, routine work and declining job security of white collar positions brings these positions closer

to that of the working class, if not the poor (Abercrombie & Urry, 1983). Middle income families see more restrictiveness in their parental roles and report more immobilization (powerlessness) in 1976 than in 1957 (Veroff et al., 1981). In the structure of society as is, the traditional tools of freedom (education & income) are not working as well any more (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). One has to ask then what has made it difficult even for middle class parents to fulfill their parenting role.

Critics of the society claim that the fragmentation of the psyche becomes necessary in a social structure that separates mind from body (as in physical labor vs. mental work), the private from the public, the individual form the social, work from pleasure, etc. In a profit based economic system, it is important that the consumption of commodities not lead to satiation of needs but to restless reconsumption. Thus, it is suggested that these overarching life conditions involve all the classes and their personal life and interpersonal relationships. Parenting becomes difficult in such a situation because the society's structure goes counter to the integration of the person and counter to the satisfaction of human needs. The family cannot regulate itself because the market is regulating it (Kovel, 1981).

What are the implications of the developmental dialectical view for the treatment of the poor and middle class damaged parents? Dialectics' affirmation of the integrity of levels of systems suggests, that all generalizations about social status cannot substitute for knowing the individual. Thus, while the

above analysis might serve as a general framework, the complexities of each individual parent and family need to be understood.

Dialectics further suggests that development and change ensue from the contradictions inherent within and between systems. Reality is seen as the outcome of opposed forces that remain internally related and part of each other (Kovel, 1981). Recall that the middle class is seen as embodying the positive values of the society and the poor and the damaged parent, the negative. Dialectics suggests that there are inherent contradictions in these strengths and weaknesses. Too much future orientation and planning in the middle class damaged parent leads to rigidity and loss of spontaneity, while the poor damaged parent might be better able to respond to and enjoy the present with the child. Denial of the inherent contradictions in each class's tendencies leads to each class's rigid use and exercise of one dimension of its capabilities. Affirmation of contradictions underlines the continual change and development inherent in a person and allows for fluidity, change and responsiveness.

Reality training has always been a significant part of therapy. However, traditional therapy has limited reality to intra and interpersonal dimensions. Social structures are not usually addressed and assuming a rather unchanging character for them, traditional therapy has often stressed the necessity for the parent to unidirectionally adapt him/herself to them. Not only is this an incomplete and therefore an inaccurate picture of

reality, but it serves to mystify the character of social structures and to leave them even more impervious to change and transformation. For those whose social reality is negative (e.g. the poor), the message of its unchanging nature is both inaccurate and leads to further depression and powerlessness. For those whose social reality is more positive (e.g the middle class), lack of knowledge of the nature of the interpenetration of social structures in their personal lives serves to keep them out of the ability to exert more control where they think they have no influence, and to exert less control where they think they are the only influential variable.

The first step in intervention with low power position damaged parents would involve clarifying their personal and social victimization, as a way of reducing the blame on them. While they have often accurately sensed the role of external conditions in their situation, their perceptions have not been validated socially, and they are paralyzed by an overwhelming internal sense of blame and guilt for all that is wrong in their lives. Only when the validity of their feelings of injustice is affirmed through the clarification of the role of others (i.e. the parent's family and the social system) will they be able to feel the pain and the rage involved in their victim position. Only then will they be able to take charge of the part that is theirs to play in transforming their lives, or in accepting the less changeable. Consciousness of one's embeddedness in various systems allows one to have a more realistic assessment of one individual's role in making changes, while also affirming the

individual's role as one element in the totality of systems operating.

For middle class parents, too, intervention involves clarification both of their personal victimization, and the social pressures involved in maintaining their social status in a hierarchical society (e.g. competitiveness, definition of a man only in terms of his job, etc.). Rather than be driven unknowingly by these pressures, support in feeling the fear and the pain involved in these pressures and consciousness of the source of these feelings will allow these parents to accept, dismiss or modify them.

"Consciousness-raising" uses the adult's cognitive skills to reflect on her own situation. While the middle class damaged parents might have more developed cognitive skills than the poor, both classes are prevented from using the best of their cognitive capabilities in their own service because of their emotional blocks. As self analysis is often a reflection of the external world's view of the person, and those analyses have often been negative and painful for these parents, self-analysis is not their strength. A context of affirmation, validation and support allows these parents to experience the pain and the rage that go with having been maltreated and thus be enabled to use and develop their cognitive skills in their own healing. Thus, the "neutral" stance of the analyst has to be replaced with one of positive support and affirmation. While traditional therapists often equate this with countertransference, this conscious, informed support is different than the unconscious involvement

and confusion of countertransference. It is through this support that these parents start to heal and become able to integrate their emotions with their cognitions, and their unconscious with their conscious.

It is difficult for professionals working with damaged parents to be truly supportive and to help in the above consciousness raising if they themselves have had little training in the macro issues affecting interpersonal relations. The training of therapists often involves intra & interpersonal analyses, but rarely is the involvement of the larger system examined in these issues. Just as the training of many therapists involves being in therapy themselves, so as to be better able to handle transference and countertransference, so too therapists need to examine the role of their own social status in their life, and in their professional views and practices. Effective therapy involves the maximum of support with the maximum of challenge (Bronfenbrenner, et al., 1984). Without a macroanalysis, middle class therapists' work with poor parents becomes challenging with little support or understanding (i.e. judgmental), while their work with middle class parents becomes supportive without adequate challenge.

American society values independence and individualism . Thus it is common, for example, for a significant proportion of housewives (41%) not to see anyone usually during the day (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1984). Many who do see others do so in impersonal contexts such as the supermarket. Middle class relationships seem to be primarily limited to the nuclear

family.This isolation seems even more pronounced in damaged parents of low power positions. These values are also reflected in the popularity that individual therapy has attained.

The above values are contrary to the dialectical stress on the interrelatedness of systems. This implies that change does not come about through an individual's efforts alone. The more systems are involved, the deeper the change. Thus, not only are the degree and quality of change in the nature of parenting related to the degree and quality of changes in all systems , but interrelationships are the medium of change both within and across systems.

If relationships are the medium of change, then one is led to question individual therapy as the main form of treatment for damaged families. While a close therapeutic relationship can be a blueprint for a positive relationship, the exercise and strengthening of relating skills and the limiting of the already formed negative skills, requires more than the two involved in the therapeutic relationship. Burnout in the professional is often a result of the heavy burden of responsibility and guilt that therapists feel when individually responsible for the healing of these parents, especially low income parents who are needy in many ways. Thus, the development and maintenance of a positive support system becomes essential for the effectiveness of the healing process. At the beginning, the professional can start with the groups that are available to each class (family and neighbors for the poor, and friends for the middle class). Team work, group therapy and parent support groups should be the

modus operandi of working with damaged parents. Where these have been used, their success attests to their significant role in the healing process (Cohn, 1982).

Finally, dialectics suggests that while healing and change in damaged parents might be slow and incremental, enough quantitative change will result in a qualitative difference in the parent. In the painstakingly gradual process of redefining the past, clarifying the present and identifying the future, the parent gradually becomes a more integrated whole person.

Let us now return to the case of Claudia and examine it from a developmental dialectical approach. In addition to clarifying the personal & familial past of Claudia and encouraging the expression of the feelings associated with these, the therapist would help her to situate herself socially and to feel the emotional significance of her social condition.

For example, the implications of Claudia's upbringing in a developing third world country, colonized and dominated by a Western power would be explored. As the economy of her country changed from feudal-agricultural to early capitalist, Claudia's social status changed from low income (as a child of a manual laborer) to middle class (as a businessman's wife,complete with maids). With it she had internalized the colonizers' view of the "natives" and the "developed", thus her interminable need to prove her being "developed" through the acquisition of material goods. In her parenting, for example, this took the form of her feeling that because she had gotten Nat all the best toys, she could in good conscience leave him with the maids while she went

shopping often.

During the exploration of these social realities, Claudia would get in touch with her pain, fear and anger at her abandonment by her family, her belittlement by the colonizers, her insatiable loneliness which she tried to fill with the panacea offered by the colonizers (consumer goods), her feelings of being overwhelmed by the children's demands, and her wish for more companionship from her husband, whose upwardly mobile strivings had up to then seemed adequate.

In this process, Claudia would become aware of the contradictions inherent in her position. While the seeds of dissatisfaction inherent in going only after consumer goods would become clear, she would also get in touch with the empathy possibilities with Nat inherent in her own abandonment and devaluation.

All this would be done in the context of a neighborhood Parenting Center available to all the residents of the area. While Claudia would be in individual therapy, she , her therapist and her husband would participate in a parent support group, composed of healthy as well as damaged parents and their therapists. Since all parents who are there need support, distinctions between damaged and healthy parents become less clear. Thus a support network would develop that because of its natural roots in the neighborhood, would operate 24 hours a day on a more informal basis. As therapists became familiar with other parents through the parent support groups, they could both both participate in their healing as well as substitute for the

main therapist when necessary. Parent child groups would provide models and reinforce appropriate parenting as well.

In conclusion, while Freud recognized that the practice he developed was fundamentally limited to replacing "hysterical misery" with "ordinary unhappiness" (Kovel, 1981), the integrative approach of the developmental dialectic model suggests that even "ordinary unhappiness" is transformable.When freedom from one's archaic past is coupled with the ability to choose to accept or to transform one's present social reality, albeit slowly, therein lies the seeds of mental health and positive parenting. Psychoanalysis when coupled with "socioanalysis" becomes a powerful tool in healing. Ultimately, however, the final test of the developmental dialectical approach lies in its wider implementation and empirical evaluation.

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